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Government Is Us

Back when there were but 48 states in Old Glory, my enormously savvy precinct committeewoman counseled: (1) Never underestimate the intelligence of American voters and (2) never overestimate the knowledge of those same voters.

A just-released national survey from Hart/Teeter for the Council for Excellence in Government confirms the wisdom of my precinct committeewoman: Contemporary American voters manifestly lack the almost unlimited optimism of their parents about the future and are instead skeptically uncertain—especially about their children's futures. They see government policies, by a 5-to-3 margin, hindering more than helping in their efforts to achieve "the American Dream." And the same Americans reveal an acute lack of knowledge about the positive difference government has actually made in American life.

It is past time for Democrats, the more pro-government party, to practice some of the same rhetorical grave-robbing they were forever accusing Ronald Reagan of when the Gipper quoted FDR. As the Hart/Teeter results indicate, Democrats must remind voters of the words of Republican President TR, who said: "The government is us; we are the government. You and I."

In 1975, 47 percent of Americans expressed "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence separately in both local government and state government. Today, confidence has dropped in local government to just 31 percent, and even lower in state government to 23 percent. But the steepest plummet of all (in 1975, confidence in the presidency, the Congress and the Supreme Court were all in the 40s) is the fall in confidence in the federal government to a lowly 15 percent.

The only really promising word heard in the survey by those who believe that government can make a positive difference is that big majorities still believe it is necessary for government to keep "a sharp eye on business" rather than simply trust "American business [to] do what it should on its own."

Watergate, assassination, impeachment, scandals and a series

of failed one-term presidencies partly explain the decline in faith in the federal government. It's no accident that every elected president since Lyndon Johnson, with the singular exception of George Bush, has won when running against the allegedly rampant stupidity, corruption and/or venality in the federal government he sought to lead.

And for nearly all of the past 25 years, the executive branch, the president and the legislative branch, Congress, have held each other in open public contempt while locked in ugly combat. One inevitable consequence of the partisan finger-pointing and blame-shifting was an uninterrupted erosion of public confidence in government.

But the U.S. government has a real record that its elected leaders have failed their constituencies by failing to tell. Consider the radically egalitarian notion that every able, ambitious student, regardless of economic status or social station, ought to have the chance for a quality higher education. Thus, the revolutionary premise of the great land-grant university plan was born in 1862, in the middle of the Civil War, at a time when less than one-half of one percent of Americans had ever been to college. Today, American public colleges award 502,000 degrees annually, including nearly two-thirds of the nation's doctorates. From these same "government" schools have come the Salk and Sabin vaccines, streptomycin, the first digital computer, the first atom-smasher and more than 100 Nobel Prize winners.

Because of the leadership of the federal government, 99 percent of the lead has been removed from our air, the Great Lakes have been saved, and both the air we breathe and the water we drink are much cleaner and healthier. Because of federal meddling and the Voting Rights Act, the state of Mississippi today has more black elected officials than any other. Because of Social Security and Medicare, the percentage of elderly Americans living in poverty has been cut by well over two-thirds. Our cars and highways are safer. Just to name a few.

The feds are far from perfect, but let's give ourselves "a victory lap" for our collective successes, remembering Teddy Roosevelt: "The government is us."

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